How Guilty Were Ordinary Citizens in Germany?

by Michael Curtis

"Don't let's be beastly to the Germans. Their Bach is really far worse than their bite," sang Noel Coward in his song written in war torn Britain in 1943. His satirical parody, a personal favorite of Winston Churchill, was directed against those who took what he thought was a too tolerant view of Britain's "enemies." The complex problem of Germany is illustrated by the fact that the song after being initially played on the BBC was quickly withdrawn.

In his speech on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1986 Elie Wiesel commented, "We must always take sides. Silence encourages the tormentor, not the tormented." The country of Germany has been haunted by both the actions and

the silence of citizens in its 20th century history. Is Germany to be seen as cruel and barbaric, typified by concentration and extermination camps, and race laws, the Nazi regime and the brutalites of the Communist Stasi tyranny in East Germany, GDR, or as the land of civility, creativity, of philosophy, Goethe, theology, including election of a German Pope, Benedict XVI, and music?

The controversial issues remain: what did Germans know of the terror, discrimination and Holocaust by Nazi Germany, when were they are aware of it, and did they approve, oppose, or remain silent?

For 70 years a variety of answers have been given by analyists, politicians, and others on these issues. On January 25, 2005, Gerhard Schroder, then German Chancellor, expressed his shame that ordinary Germans were responsible for the Holocaust. The Nazi ideology was carried out by people. The memory of Nazi genocide is part of German national identity and Germans have a moral obligation to remember the crimes and to remain vigilant so that the horrors of Auschwitz are never repeated. Three years later, in January 2006, the Deutsche Bahn, Germany's state rail company, admitted its central role in the Holocaust by transporting millons to their death in extermination camps, even charging adults and children over four a fee for doing so.

In a number of his movies Alfred Hitchcock portrayed the predicament of an ordinary person caught up in extraordinary circumstances. That predicament was exemplified in Germany in an influential 1993 book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution* by Christopher Browning with its account of average, middle aged policemen, not committed Nazis or fanatics, who became cold blooded killers of 38,000 Jews in Poland. The members had a choice of whether to carry out orders to massacre the Jews and participate in the Holocaust. Only 15 of the 500 in the battalion refused to do so.

Twenty five years later, the issue of individual decisions and the disruptions of the lives of citizens in Germany is the subject of *Broken Lives: How Ordinary Germans Experienced the 20th Century*, (Princeton University Press, 2018) by Konrad H. Jarausch, a German born Professor at the University of North Carolina. Not a history from above, his work is based on autobiographies and memoirs of a cohort of people born in the 1920s, who became adults during the Nazi regime and lived to see the reunification of the country and the political and economic recovery in present day democratic Germany. "The ordinary people" include people from all social classes, from various geographical regions, and different religious perspectives, struggling to lead normal lives in a setting of forces threatening death and destruction.

The autobiographies blend expeiences and memories, selective, biased, and incomplete, yet engrossing in showing how earlier experiences are remembered and reflecting the human drama of the German 20th century. Jarausch interweaves his comments on these stories and own lucid and objective analysis of historical events, from Imperial Germany, through Weimar, the Nazi regime, to the Communist German Democratic Republic, 1949-1990, and the present Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-.

As the title of the book suggests, Germans overwhelmingly experienced broken lives, a mixture of suffering and happiness, in the 20th century. In their narratives the central vortex is the Nazi dictatorship, World War II, and the Holocaust. All disclaim any personal responsibility. They tell of terror at home and at the military front, life in bomb shelters, mass rape, flight and expulsion due to German aggression. They express a variety of points of view: some were apolitical; some knew nothing of the atrocities or of the number and purpose of concentration camps; some were " intellectual resisters;" some spoke warmly of fun and games in the Hitler Jugend but also of misplaced idealism; many were patriotic and took pride in the initial German military

victories but as the war dragged on, especially after Stalingrad, they began to question the purpose of “Hitler’s war.” Those who lived in the Communist GDR defended socialism as an ideal while critical of the practices of the regime.

Yet the crux of these versions of “communicative memory,” trying to make sense of personal fate, is largely apologetic. There are tales of common suffering and of both physical and psychologial difficulties. They focus mainly on German victimhood, but fail to fully describe Nazi crimes. The world has heard that song before, it’s from an old familiar score.

The stories tend to resort to standard excuses or explanations of Nazi behavior; the unfair treatment of Germany by the Allies after World War I; the “shameful” Versailles Treaty; the humiliation of the country; the considerable unemployment; the loss of territory in and beyond Europe; the ineffective and changing governments in Weimar; and the “stab in the back” which was responsible for Germany’s defeat in World War I. Above all, the stories make a distinction between Nazi leaders who were the perpetrators and those who followed orders and did not act out of personal motivation.

In the range of stated reactions to the Nazi regime and the issue of nationhood some narratives expressed contrition for their behavior but the one most difficult to find was that of any expressed dedication or fanatical support for the Nazis. Some accepted the Goebbels propaganda that the concentration camps were corrective institutions or for self-defense. Others confessed ignorance because of the supposed secrecy about the atrocities.

This memory culture of victimization persisted for some time in the post War period. It lessened for a number of reasons. This was partly due to the anti-Nazi record and stance of postwar politicians, starting with Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Theodor Heuss. It was partly the result of revelations of the Holocaust in court cases, in Ulm

in 1959 when 10 members of the Gestapo were convicted of the murders of 5,000 Jews in West Lithuania, and in the series of trials in Frankfurt, 1963-65, of 22 SS charged with their role in crimes in Auschwitz-Birkenau and sub camps. The change was partly influenced by critical media, TV series, and literature, like that of Peter Weiss and Gunter Grass.

Yet, it remains true that Nazi crimes were rarely mentioned in the 1950s, that only 789 of the 6,500 who were SS officials at Auschwitz were ever brought to trial, and those who were convicted usually got light sentences or were not sentenced. The German judiciary was slow to punish those directly involved in the Holocaust. One legal problem was that the offenders had to be linked to specific murders.

From the book any conclusion of a complicated picture is perforce mixed. Apart from the direct killers and police and railroad personnel who were enablers, more ordinary citizens supported the Nazi regime and its social and political values and then sought to explain it than apologists admit, but fewer than some critics such Daniel Goldhagan or Robert Gellately claim.

Jarausch concludes that from the perspective of ordinary people German history in the 20th century reveals a shift from catastophe to civility. If Germans are still troubled by memories or allegations of individual and collective responsibilty, today they are chastened. One hopes this optimistic picture is and will remain correct, but the increase in antisemitism in recent year in the country suggests caution since detours may lie ahead.